THE MARCH OF WAR

THE INVASION OF SICILY

ON May 13, 1943, the fighting on North African soil had come to an end. According to a statement by Winston Churchill made on June 8, the British First and Eighth Armies had lost 35,000 men in the course of the fighting in Tunisia (not including that in Libya), and on May 28 Washington announced the American losses to have been 18,600. The actual losses of the Allies were probably much higher.

ALLIED PREPARATIONS

After the elimination of the Axis bridgehead in Tunisia, the Allies, constantly prompted by Moscow, prepared for the much-talked-of invasion of Europe. Air raids on Italy and her islands, which had been carried out regularly since early this year, grew more violent in a sudden crescendo, while the Anglo-American losses, especially in multiengined bombers, mounted correspondingly. A map in the July issue of this magazine (pp. 24/25) shows the cities and districts chiefly affected. Sicily, Sardinia, and southern Italy were the main targets, and such places as Palermo, Messina, and Naples experienced weeks with one or more attacks each day.

By the end of May the small islands in the waters between Sicily and Africa had become the main objectives, and after violent attacks Pantelleria, Lampedusa, Linosa, and Lampione were occupied on June 11, 12, 13, and 14 respectively.

Meanwhile, Axis reconnaissance planes reported concentrations of warships, transports, and landing vessels all along the southern Mediterranean coast from Gibraltar to Syria. The Allied Mediterranean fleet was bolstered by a number of units comprising American warships and aircraft carriers. It was estimated that some 44 infantry divisions, 15 to 20 tank formations, and 2 air-borne landing divisions were concentrated, while ample supplies were stored in all important embarkation ports. The Allied press mentioned a force of one million men ready to be unleashed. Early in July, Sicily seemed the most likely object of an invasion.

THE AXIS POSITION

Since the Axis command had to post the troops available in the Mediterranean area not only in Sicily but along the whole length of the European southern flank (as described in detail in our last issue), only a limited number of these troops could be employed for Sicily. The Axis also had another reason for limiting the number of troops on Sicily: if the Allies were to decide on a large-scale attack on Sicily—for which there were many indications—by making use of their superior naval and air fleets, this island might become a trap for the Axis troops should the enemy succeed either in capturing Messina by land or in gaining air supremacy over the Strait of Messina.

In every invasion attempt the Allies had the advantage of being able to choose the place and time and concentrate their forces in one or two spots, while the Axis had to spread its troops along 60,000 kilometers of coast line. This made the defense of islands such as Sicily and Sardinia a precarious matter. For while on the Continent, troops could be rushed to the points of invasion with comparative speed and safety, the situation was less favorable in the case of islands in view of the Allied superiority in ships and planes. The Axis command was fully aware of the fact that it would be extremely difficult to hold Sicily against an all-out Allied attack. Hence the task of the Sicilian defense, if it were unable to throw the invaders back into the sea, was to make the Allies pay such a heavy price in men, armament, and ships that the enemy's eagerness to continue this kind of warfare would be seriously affected.

The number of Axis troops stationed in Sicily at the moment of invasion has so far not been divulged. At any rate, the figures of 300,000 Italians and 100,000 Germans mentioned by the Allies seem grossly exaggerated. At a time when the Allied forces

landed on Sicily were believed to be 11 divisions German sources declared the defenders to be outnumbered. This would put the number of Axis troops on the island at less than 11 divisions.

Given the number of troops available for Sicily and the fact that the length of Sicily's coast is 1,115 kilometers (three times the distance from London to Paris), the Axis was confronted by the task of employing its forces to the best possible advantage. It could either post its troops at various sectors along the coast, thereby running the risk, however, that the landings might take place at other points, so that the necessary regrouping of forces would cost a lot of time; or it could concentrate its troops in the interior of the island in order to throw them from there at maximum speed against the enemy wherever he might have landed. Events have shown that the Axis command decided in favor of this second method. The coast itself was occupied only by weak coastal units, consisting mainly of second reserves, while the units concentrated in the interior waited until the center of gravity of the Allied attack had been ascertained and could be opposed with full force.

THE LANDING

When on July 9, at 10.20 p.m., the port of Syracuse on the east coast of Sicily was shelled, the Axis command ordered a general alert throughout the island. In the early hours of the following day, parachute formations were landed in the sparsely populated southeastern corner of Sicily. Immediately afterwards, naval and air attacks were directed against comparatively long stretches of the eastern, western and southern coast line. Bombs and broadsides from naval guns silenced coastal batteries with a hail of fire, and behind the curtain of this barrage men and supplies were put ashore. The sea swarmed with vessels of all sizes and description. According to Roosevelt's speech of July 28, 160,000 men with 14,000 vehicles, 1,800 guns, and 800 tanks were carried to Sicily in 3,000 ships.

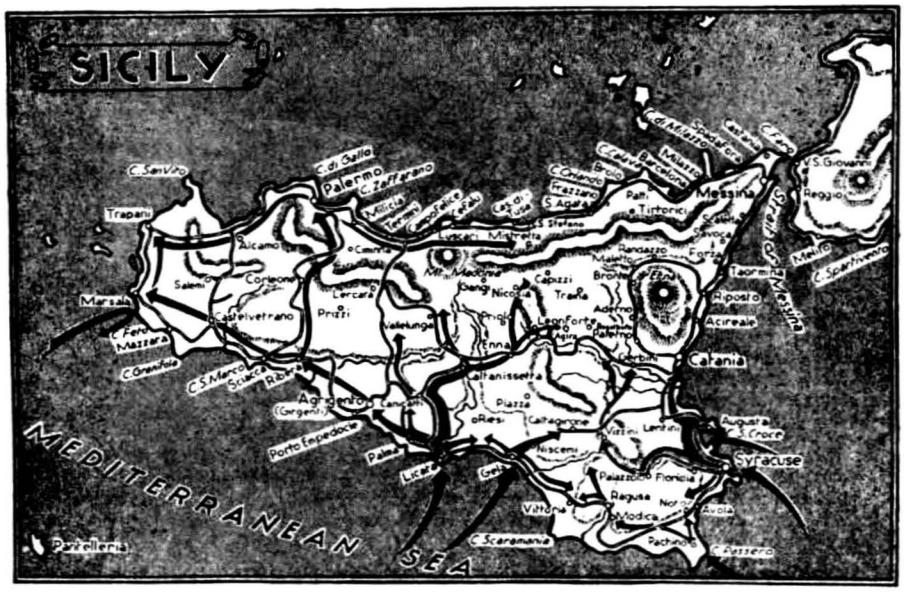
Thanks to the vigilance of the Axis forces and the population, most of the enemy troops who had landed by parachute were annihilated—some 8,000 men within the first 24 hours. The Allied attempt quickly to expand the bridgeheads toward the interior by linking up the forces landed from ships with those landed from planes was thus frustrated. Likewise the footholds which the Allies had gained on the west coast between Marsala and Cape Feto were cleared by immediate counteraction on the part of the coastal defense. On the other two sectors—the Licata/Gela area of the south coast and the southern third of the east coast—the invaders also met with stubborn resistance. But, by reason of the enormous weight of their superior naval and air forces, they managed to hold their bridgeheads and slowly to press inland, while the operative reserves of the Axis rushed up to oppose them.

THE BATTLE BEGINS

Reinforced by new divisions, the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery made some territorial gains from its three bridgeheads in Pachino, Syracuse, and Augusta, where four divisions had been landed originally. The right wing of this army aimed north, while the left flank drove toward Ragusa to effect a junction with the newly formed American Seventh Army under General George Patton. Of this army, three divisions including some Canadian units had originally landed between Licata and Cape Scaramania, mainly in Licata and in the Bay of Gela. On July 12 and 13, additional divisions were put ashore. By July 23 German sources claimed that a total of six American and five British divisions had disembarked.

From the strategic point of view, it was obvious from the outset which part of the island would seem the most important to both sides—the northeastern corner, roughly forming the triangle Cape Orlando/Catania/Messina. It was clear that the Allies would try to reach Messina as quickly as possible to cut off the rest of the Axis forces on the island and that the Axis, on the other hand, would make its main stand here.

The task of reaching Messina—the most important object of the entire Sicilian campaign—was entrusted to the right wing of the Eighth Army, which latter was considered the crack force among the invading troops. As soon as it had been disembarked, the Eighth Army started on its race toward Catania, the gateway to the narrow coastal corridor leading to Messina between the sea and the giant massif of Mount Etna (3,279 meters high). The other Allied divisions pressed north more slowly. Attempts to speed up the advance by the employment of paratroops in the rear of the defenders failed, as they were wiped out.



The most violent fighting broke out when, on July 13, the British reached the plain (about 15 by 20 kilometers in extent) lying to the south of Catania. As the Axis forces, with the Hermann Goering division as their backbone, slowly withdrew northward, the Eighth Army found itself in the flat plain fighting against an enemy entrenched in the mountains bordering it on the north. The British attacks became costlier every day and practically came to a halt by July 25.

Shielded by the forces at Catania, Axis troops meanwhile evacuated the western part of the island, withdrawing to the northeastern triangle. The Americans followed the retiring enemy and proudly announced great victories. Real fighting, however, did not begin for them until they reached the line San Stefano/Agira, approximately on July 26. By the end of July the struggle for the strategic triangle had begun.

HEAVY LOSSES AT SEA

The resistance of the Axis was not confined to land fighting. From the outset Italian and German planes and submarines attacked and destroyed many Allied war ships, transports, and landing barges off the Sicilian coast. On July 13 and 14 alone, 5 destroyers were sunk and 8 cruisers heavily damaged, apart from the damage sustained by some smaller warships. The Allied air fleets were also engaged by Italian and German airmen and antiaircraft units. In spite of the great numerical superiority of the Allied air forces, a large number of enemy fighters and bombers were brought down.

THE MEN IN CHARGE

The Allied operations are under the supreme command of General Eisenhower, whose second-in-command is General Alexander. The Allied air fleets are directed by the British Air Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, to whom the British Air Marshal Sir Arthur Conningham and Vice Air Marshal Sir Hugh P. Lloyd as well as the American Lieutenant General Carl Spaatz and Major General James Doolittle, (who commanded the US bomber attack on Japan on April 18, 1942) are subordinated. Naval operations are being conducted under the command of the Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham; the American naval forces are headed by Vice-Admiral Henry Hewitt.

Except for the Italian commander of the Sixth Army, General Guzzoni, no names of Axis generals have been announced so far.

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In his speech of July 28, President Roosevelt declared that the Allies had been planning a whole year for the Sicilian campaign. If such a well-prepared attack against one of the most distant outposts of Europe, has not, after three weeks of fighting, produced any greater results than those described above, then Europe can face future invasions with calm confidence.